BRILL

NUMEN 62 (2015) 408–430

NVMEN
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Finding God in Buddhism: A New Trend in Contemporary Buddhist Approaches to Islam

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Abstract

The purported absence of a highest god who creates and governs the universe in the Buddhist worldview has often been regarded as an obstacle to dialogue and mutual understanding between Buddhists and Muslims. However, there has emerged a trend among contemporary Buddhist scholars to discuss a Buddhist equivalent of such a god in order to relate to Islam doctrinally. This article examines three examples of such an attempt, respectively representing the Theravāda, Tibetan, and Japanese Pure Land traditions, as endeavors in the theology of religions. The article demonstrates that these accounts all seek to overcome the psychological gap between Buddhists and Muslims created by perceived doctrinal remoteness between the two traditions, by drawing parallels between the Islamic concept of God and Buddhist notions of the ultimate reality, be it the dhamma, emptiness, Adi Buddha, or Amida Buddha. It will be argued that, although highly unconventional, this line of approach has been motivated by the agenda shared among these Buddhist scholars to promote interreligious harmony and understanding on a global scale. Such agendas tend to be developed in reaction to interreligious conflicts or through personal involvement with Muslims.

Keywords

Buddhism – Islam – interreligious relations – theology of religions

Buddhism and Islam have often been perceived as radically different and doctrinally irreconcilable. Their commonalities tend to be pointed out only in the

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areas of mysticism and morality/ethics.[1] The question of god has been regarded as a major "stumbling block" in Buddhist-Muslim relations, which divides the two traditions on the most fundamental level, making it difficult, if not impossible, for Buddhists and Muslims to understand and accept each other.[2]

The present article highlights the emergence of a trend among contemporary Buddhists to move beyond traditional doctrinal formulations in order to accommodate Islam doctrinally, as a means to promote interreligious harmony and world peace. Through examining three examples of such attempts made by Theravāda, Tibetan, and Pure Land Buddhists, this article argues that their willingness to emphasize a Buddhist equivalent of God in discussing Islam is a direct reaction to developments in a globalized world and the ever-increasing relevance of different religions and cultures.

Theology of Religions and Buddhism

This article employs the perspective of the theology of religions as its main analytical framework. It uses categories formulated by the theology of religions, modifying them slightly to best represent approaches in contemporary Buddhist perceptions of Islam.

There are three major approaches commonly established in the Christian theology of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. They were originally based on the extent of recognition that a particular view gives to the validity of the salvific efficacy of traditions other than one's own.[3]

Buddhism is usually considered to be a non-theistic (or even atheistic) tradition for which the concept of "theology," i.e., discourse about God (Greek: *theos*), is almost nonsensical (cf. Hayes 1988). Some Buddhist scholars, however, have recently made a positive move towards employing the term to mean

1 For example, spiritual and ethical elements are emphasized in the latest discussion of Buddhism and Islam from a comparative perspective, Shah-Kazemi 2010. See also Scott 1995: 152.

2 The idea of Buddhist and Islamic worldviews being irreconcilably remote and the presumed absence of God in Buddhism being a serious problem for some Muslims have unfortunately been confirmed by the Taliban's destruction of the giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan in March 2001. While the event seems to have been, to a substantial degree, politically and economically motivated, the Taliban propagated their campaign against the statues as a theological one, denouncing Buddhists as infidels. The theological problem is emphasized in the Taliban's edict issued the 26 February 2001. For the full translation of the edict, see Flood 2002: 655. A strong emphasis on economic issues is found in Hashemi 2001.

3 Hick 1987: 331–333.

Buddhist discourse about non-mundane spheres, most notably the Buddha(s) and the dharma as eternal truths (cf. Jackson and Makransky 2000). There are also Buddhist "theologians," who have been engaged in this hermeneutical exercise in collaboration or dialogue with their Christian colleagues.[4] Thus, this article treats Buddhist discussions of Islam from a doctrinal perspective as falling within the sphere of the theology of religions.

In applying the categories of the theology of religions to Buddhist contexts, the present work employs two major analytical categories: inclusivism and parallelism, excluding exclusivism as it does not allow the teachings of other religions in regards to attaining salvation to possess any validity; hence, it does not apply to any of the views explored in the present discussion.

Inclusivism refers to the approach holding that, although the truth is found ultimately in one's own tradition, some aspects of this truth are present in other traditions, albeit in incomplete forms. It recognizes some validity in the spiritual paths provided by other religions, but does not regard them as sufficient to attain salvation (Race 1983: 38). In the present study, it is defined more broadly than it is in the context of Christian theology. Here, it is employed to refer to attempts to recognize major concept(s) or figure(s) of other traditions as valid and valuable according to one's own tradition, thereby locating them in one's own worldview (Kiblinger 2005: 5, 9). While it may be exclusivist in its implications, this line of thinking is "practically helpful to a community as it becomes more ecumenically minded,"[5] in that it does not compromise the doctrines of the tradition in question nor necessarily ostensibly invalidate other traditions.[6]

Parallelism is a modification of the category of pluralism, which represents a view that all major religions of the world embody different conceptions of the one ultimate reality and that different religious experiences are thus equally valid.[7] It refers to a view focused on finding similarities between the major concepts of two traditions, drawing parallels between them. In the Buddhist context, as shall be seen below, this is especially enacted on the level of the

4 The foremost example of this is the Japanese Zen scholar Masao Abe (1915–2006).

5 Hick 1987: 331.

6 In Buddhist-Muslim relations, inclusivism is most typically found in Muslim views of Buddhism, wherein the historical Buddha is understood to be one of the Muslim prophets. However, it is also widely used by contemporary Buddhist views. See, for example, Kiblinger 2005: 2.

7 The difficulty of capturing mystical experiences is acknowledged by major proponents of pluralism. See Hick 1987.

ultimate truth.[8] Although parallelism is not originally part of the terminology of the theology of religions, its use is preferred over pluralism in this study because it describes more faithfully the new line of Buddhist approaches to Islam discussed here. These approaches regard Buddhist and Muslim concepts of the ultimate truth as comparable, but do not argue ostensibly that all religions point to the same thing.

Opinions are divided over if and to what extent such perspectives of the theology of religions are helpful in interreligious dialogue or conducive to interreligious harmony. Some are suspicious of using them, since they primarily represent an internal attempt by one religion to define and understand its own religious stance towards others (cf. Kamata 2004: 49–50, 74), while others do acknowledge that inclusivism benefits dialogue "at least indirectly" (Waardenburg 2007: 55–56).

This study takes the position that endeavors in the theology of religions, except overtly exclusivist ones, are beneficial in promoting interreligious harmony, as such attempts to doctrinally make sense of other religions can help the followers of the tradition in question cultivate sympathy towards, and a sense of connection with, their religious other.[9]

Key Doctrines and Concepts

Although Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 5th century BCE), the historical Buddha, dealt at length with the followers of other Indian traditions, such as Hindus and Jains, early Buddhist literature does not set out a general doctrinal framework from within which Buddhists should relate to non-Buddhist traditions.[10] This, coupled with his silence on the question of God,[11] may have been one

8 This study uses this expression in lowercase for the Buddhist notion of the highest truth, unless it is rendered in uppercase in quotations.

9 For such positive attitudes to filter down to a popular level, it is essential that religious leaders be in touch with the "grassroots realities" of their communities, and that they share the fruit of interreligious dialogue with the ordinary followers of their traditions. See Ramadan 2004: 209.

10 However, there is a strong tradition of debate in various Buddhist schools that have attempted to dispute or relate other schools as well as traditions. For major ways in which Buddhists have dealt with the doctrines of other Buddhist schools, see, for example, Harvey 2008.

11 For the Buddha's reluctance to discuss "unnecessary metaphysical questions," see Rahula 1999: 12–15. Some contemporary Muslims have argued on the basis of this that the Buddha did not deny the existence of God. See bin Muhammad 2010: xiii. However, it is possible

of the reasons that Buddhist attempts to doctrinally accommodate Muslims have been rather limited, at least in comparison with Muslim discussions of Buddhism, which recognize some validity in non-Islamic traditions through regarding their leaders as Muslim prophets.[12]

In order to highlight the unconventional and "innovative" nature of the attempts made by Buddhist scholars who are the subjects of this study to relate to Islam doctrinally, this section introduces the main doctrines and concepts found in Buddhism that are relevant to their discussions. It examines how major concepts in Buddhism and Islam can be compared within the framework informed by the concept of emptiness (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) and the theory of the three bodies (*trikāya*) of the Buddha, which are prominent in Mahāyāna Buddhism, as well as pointing out possible problems accompanying the comparison.

Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is a term designating the absence of the inherent nature (*svabhāva*) of all phenomena. It is often regarded as the nature of ultimate reality by Mahāyāna Buddhists. Concepts of emptiness featured prominently in the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) literature, and were further developed and elaborated by Nāgārjuna, the second-century CE Indian scholar. Such philosophical viewpoints are most intimately related to the principle of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and to concepts of impermanence (*anitya*) and no-self (*anātman*).[13] Emptiness, therefore, is the way things are, the "true nature of things," expressed in the most radical fashion. Yet, as it refers to the interdependence and impermanence of all things, emptiness fundamentally defies definition. It is not a thing or an entity, a place or a state of mind, or some kind of mysterious being. It is not "the Ultimate Truth in the sense that it is an ultimately existing or inherently existing entity," either (Williams 1989: 62–63).

The teaching on emptiness finds practical expression in the concept of skillful means, often referred to simply as *upāya*. This Mahāyāna concept features prominently in the *Lotus Sutra* (*saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*). It encourages different methods and representations (such as words) to be employed, depending on the context. Therefore, all is relative in terms of the ultimate

to read early Buddhist literature as suggesting that Islam would be regarded as an "unsatisfactory religion," in that it is based on revelation or "baseless" faith. See Jayatilleke 1990: 143, 145.

12 For more on Muslim attempts to recognize the Buddha as a prophet, see Obuse 2010a.

13 Jackson 2004: 809–810; Streng 1967: 58–65.

truth; there is not a single authoritative method or way to realize the dharma or to become enlightened.[14]

As an explanatory principle of multiple manifestations of the Buddha, the theory of *trikāya*, is a perfect example of skillful means, making the dharma accessible to those on different levels of spiritual development. The three bodies are *dharmakāya* (the Truth Body), *saṃbhogakāya* (the Enjoyment Body), and *nirmāṇakaya* (the Emanation Body). *Dharmakāya* refers to the ultimate reality of Buddhahood that entails the realization of emptiness itself, whereas *saṃbhogakāya* represents its manifestations, often in the form of celestial Buddhas. *Nirmāṇakaya* refers to its human manifestations, those manifesting in human form who lived and taught the dharma in the world, with Śākyamuni Buddha being the Buddha of the present eon (Makransky 2004).[15]

It is also noteworthy that *dharmakāya* sometimes takes a semi-personal aspect and is represented as Buddha Vairocana (Japanese: Dainichi Nyorai; Sanskrit: Mahāvairocana Tathāgata) in the esoteric Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism,[16] or as the Adi Buddha (the primordial Buddha) in the *Kālacakratantra* tradition.[17] Some scholars of Buddhism claim that such an idea of the universal Buddha can be compared to a concept of God in the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[18] The Adi Buddha, in particular, has been considered by Indonesian Buddhists to be a Buddhist equivalent of the creator god in that it embodies, hence "creates," all perceptions or appearances that comprise the world on the conventional level.[19] Also comparable to

14 See Pye 2003 for an extensive study of this concept. The concept of skillful means is often employed in an interreligious context to show that the Buddhist tradition implicitly recognizes non-Buddhists. See, for example, Gross 2005 and Makransky 2003. One of the major points of contention, however, is whether the *sutra* recognizes all paths as equally valid, or only one path (Sanskrit: *ekayāna*) as ultimately valid and the others as inferior and only provisional. For views encouraging an accommodation of other traditions based on this concept, see, for example, Kanno 1995 and Kiblinger 2004.

15 For the development of the *trikāya* doctrine, see also Nagao 1991.

16 Abe 2004: 764–766.

17 The *Kālacakra Tantra* is the last major product of Indian Vajrayāna Buddhism, composed in the early eleventh century. Written in the context of Muslim military activity on the Indian subcontinent, it has sections on Islam, covering such topics as basic Muslim practices, the place of the prophet Muhammad in history, and the nature of God. For discussions about its interpretations, see Newman 1998 and Berzin 2006: 214, 2010: 191.

18 Harvey 2001: 111–112; Makransky 2006: 56; Abe 2004: 764–766.

19 Some Indonesian Buddhists, notably those from the indigenous Buddhayāna school, have put forward Adi Buddha as their Supreme God, the (historical) Buddha and *bodhisattvas* as prophets, and the *Tipitaka*, *Dhammapada*, and *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan*, an anonymous Mahāyāna Buddhist text written in East Java in the tenth century as their

the God of the Abrahamic traditions is Buddha Amitābha (Japanese: Amida), the chief object of faith and worship in the Pure Land schools of Buddhism who, like God, is characterized by compassion and assumes a salvific role. However, Amitābha is not a creator, nor a judge of people's deeds at the end of their lives, but compassionately takes all who have not committed particularly grave sins against the dharma to his Pure Land (Sanskrit: *sukhāvatī*).[20]

For a Buddhist understanding of Islam, it can be observed that the concept of emptiness as expounded in the *trikāya* doctrine, which accounts for the existence of many Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, could provide a way of interpreting major concepts and figures in Islam (Makransky 2006: 55). Although it has not been as widely employed in the context of Buddhist-Muslim relations, discussions based on the *trikāya* doctrine have been undertaken in the Buddhist-Christian context, in which the concept of God is seen either as a parallel or "substitute" for the Buddhist notion of *dharmakāya*[21] or as one of the *saṃbhogakāya* figures in an inclusivist framework.[22]

The model proposed here establishes a parallelist rather than an inclusivist account, upon which the concept of *trikāya* and that of *tawḥīd* (in its literal meaning, making many one) are considered to serve as principles accounting for all the different manifestations of the ultimate reality in Buddhism and Islam, respectively.[23] The non-personal, unknown, "no-thing" aspect of God (or the ultimate reality)[24] may be related to *dharmakāya*, while the personified aspect of God, as manifested to His followers, can be recognized as *saṃbhogakāya* in exercising various qualities such as wisdom, compassion, and salvific power. Finally, the prophet Muhammad could be considered to be on the level of *nirmāṇakaya*, in that he was a living human teacher of the truth, just as Śākyamuni Buddha. However, this would only be the case if core Buddhist and Muslim teachings are considered to share common features.

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holy scriptures. Theravāda Buddhists, who found accepting Adi Buddha as a Supreme God problematic, have instead interpreted "God" as referring to the Unconditional or Absolute, i.e., the Three Jewels. See Brown 1987: 108–117.

20 For more on the cults of Amitābha, see Williams 2009: 238–266.

21 See, for example, Ward 1994: 167–173. The theory of *trikāya* has also been compared to the Trinitarian creed of Christianity. See Cleary 1986. From the Buddhist side, Kōsei Morimoto (1934–), a Japanese Buddhist cleric and scholar in Islamic studies, regards dharmakāya as a potential Buddhist "substitute for God in monotheism" (Morimoto 2002: 19).

22 See, for example, Abe 1995.

23 The idea "one in many, many in one" is found in both traditions. It is acknowledged, for example, in Khatami 2001: 125. In Buddhism, the expression is typically found in the Huayen (Japanese: *kegon*) school of Buddhism. See Takemura 2004: 160–162.

24 See Böwering 2002: 316–331.

This framework can provide a helpful starting point for dialogue between Buddhists and Muslims on a doctrinal level. At the very least, it could provide starting points for (Mahāyāna) Buddhist ways of relating to Islam, thanks to the structural parallels evoked between key concepts and figures in Buddhism and Islam.[25]

This parallel, however, would not do full justice to the notions of God and Prophet Muhammad as understood in Islam. First of all, although *dharmakāya* and God might both be recognized as ultimate principles of the universe, the concepts have a profound difference; the former is empty of true existence, while the latter is truly and inherently existent.[26] The creator (*al-khāliq*)/ judge (*al-hakīm*, wise, and *al-ʿādil*, just) aspect of god,[27] which is crucial in the Islamic (as well as in Judaeo-Christian) worldview, does not find proper expression in the Buddhist idea of *saṃbhogakāya*, as the latter does not engage in either activity.[28] Similarly, the element of revelation in the role of Prophet Muhammad, which is again of absolute importance in Islam, cannot be acknowledged or accommodated by the *trikāya* theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the Theravāda tradition, would-be Buddhas discover and realize the truth for themselves and teach it to others. In Mahāyāna traditions, *nirmāṇakāya* figures are already enlightened. Instead of receiving such enlightenment from an external source, i.e., God, the source is generated from propensities that already exist. It is also to be noted that, unlike *nirmāṇakāya*, which is characterized by emptiness of inherent existence or entity, Muhammad is neither a manifestation of God nor in any way similar to him, which renders drawing parallels problematic.

25 Those who accept Adi Buddha or Vairocana as the personalized expression of *dharmakāya* could equate *dharmakāya* with God in terms of both personal and non-personal aspects.

26 God in Islam and emptiness have been compared as the principles of one and zero, respectively. See Toshio Kuroda's remark in Hiro 1992: 17.

27 See Arnaldez 1990: 980–988.

28 Although the Buddhist notion of dependent origination or the law of *karma* and rebirth does not "require" or allow for a god who judges people's actions, both worldviews are similar in that they are both "systems" of determining the course of the phenomenal world and, as such, consider human actions (including intentions) as the foremost basis for destiny. The suggestion that Buddhism and Islam are both 'deed-based' religions has often been made by contemporary Muslims. See, for example, Shah-Kazemi 2010: 16–18.

Trends in Contemporary Buddhist Discussions of Islam

Although systematic discussions are still rare, Buddhist references to Islam and Muslims have increased considerably in the contemporary period, especially after the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas and 9/11.[29] While this clearly suggests a rise in Buddhist interest in or concern about Islam and Muslims, such major developments in interreligious and international political arenas are not the sole reasons for contemporary Buddhists' willingness to relate to Muslims doctrinally. Such interest can also be attributed to personal contact or awareness of regional interreligious issues, both of which have been increasingly encouraged by globalization. In identifying the factors influencing such initiatives among contemporary Buddhist approaches to Islam, two major tendencies can be highlighted.

First, Buddhists who are based in or focused on the main locus of Buddhist-Muslim relations, such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Malaysia, do not normally engage in elaborate doctrinal discussions about Islam.[30] They often focus on common ethical and moral values such as the middle way, and compassion and tolerance towards religious others, thereby emphasizing the unity of all religions in order to improve communal relations and alleviate any tension there is between the two communities.[31]

More full-fledged doctrinal discussions often come from Buddhist writers based outside the main locus of Buddhist-Muslim coexistence and who are not directly facing practical communal problems with Muslims. As shall be seen, such initiatives are found primarily among Buddhist leaders and scholars who possess extensive international careers.[32]

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29 For example, a series of Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue conferences was initiated by the Burmese-born Dharma Master Hsin Tao (1948–) after the Bamiyan incident to foster better mutual understanding between Buddhists and Muslims. For more on the series, which is continuing, see Global Family for Love and Peace [n.d.]; UNESCO 2003. The objective of the series is mentioned in the introductory remark to Tao et al. 2004.

30 For an overview of contemporary Buddhist-Muslim relations, see Obuse 2010b, chapter 4.

31 A good example of this is found in K. Sri Dhammananda (1919–2006), a Sri Lankan-born Theravāda Buddhist teacher who was based in Kuala Lumpur. He views, for instance, "the Sermon on the Mount in Christianity, the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism and the concept of Brotherhood in Islam" as conveying similar messages of good will towards others (Dhammananda 1999: 4).

32 It has to be noted, however, that the distinction between the communal and global perspectives can be extremely fluid; an awareness of communal issues may encourage more global initiatives with potentially more far-reaching influences, as in the case of Buddhadasa discussed below.

The second important development in contemporary Buddhist approaches to Islam is the emergence of parallelism, which seems to have been necessitated by the increasing attention given to Islam. As stated above, Buddhist discourse on other religions has been influenced by Christian theology. The predominance of inclusivism among Buddhist theologies of religions may be attributed to the engagement of prominent Buddhist scholars in dialogue with Christians, where they tend to employ conceptual frameworks familiar to Christian theologians. While they may attempt to establish a common ground between Buddhism and Christianity through such undertakings, Buddhist inclusivists only rarely mention Islam; even when they do, they do so only in passing.

Parallelism, on the other hand, typically represents the new trend in contemporary Buddhist approaches to Islam. Buddhist writers employing a parallelist approach tend to focus on Islam rather than discussing it on the side, as inclusivist writers focused on Christianity tend to do. As shall be clear from the examples below, this tends to be achieved through drawing parallels between God and the ultimate truth in Buddhism. While inclusivist discussions do not normally discuss the concept of God in Islam in particular but almost seem to assume it to be the same as that found in Christianity, parallelist writings pay more attention to the Islamic notion of God, attempting to understand Islamic doctrines more on their own terms and directly comparing them with Buddhist ones. Parallelism can therefore be said to have emerged from the necessity felt among some contemporary Buddhists to relate to Muslims directly. This could also suggest a move towards a more Buddhist-specific framework for the theology of religions; parallelism reflects more faithfully the Buddhist focus on the use of skillful means to achieve the objective, in this case, of establishing interreligious harmony and mutual understanding, rather than seeking a definitive definition of the ultimate truth.

What follows examines three relatively systematic discussions of Islam advanced by scholars with "global" perspectives. These scholars come from Theravāda, Tibetan, and Pure Land strands of Buddhism, the first representing inclusivism and the latter two, parallelism.

Bhikkhu Buddhadasa: Inclusivism in a Parallelist Guise

Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (1906–1993) is a Thai Buddhist teacher of the Theravāda tradition active in interreligious dialogues, especially with Christians. Using the Buddhist concept of the two truths (Kiblinger 2005: 55–56), he argues that all religions are essentially one and the same, if understood in religious (or

"dhamma") language. However, they may appear to be different or incompatible with one another if seen from the point of view of conventional language (Buddhadasa 1969: 2–4). According to this Buddhist teacher renowned for his innovative interpretations of Theravāda doctrines,[33] all religions share emptiness as the Ultimate Truth. He does not see this as a specifically Buddhist notion.[34] As they all share the same truth of the dhamma, he argues that "[o]nce one has grasped the concept of 'Dhamma,' one becomes a good Buddhist, a good Christian, and a good Muslim all at once."[35]

Seeing the essence of religion as expressed differently in different religions,[36] he identifies what is called God in other religious traditions with the dhamma. Based on the *ekayāna* (one-vehicle) thinking found in the *Lotus Sutra*, he further argues that Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam provide different paths. On these paths, wisdom, faith/trust, and willpower predominate, respectively, as followers elect to walk a particular path "according to one's individual temperament" in order to reach their shared goal (Buddhadasa 1967: 12–13).

What is even more intriguing is that Buddhadasa also invokes Islamic teachings to support his attempt to relate different religions to each other. He mentions the qur'anic passage: For every nation there is an apostle (10.47), on the basis of which an agreement on doctrinal matters could be sought, calling it a "motto of good will."[37] However, while claiming that the term "apostle," meaning "a man of God who preaches the truth," can be found in all religions, this Thai monk recognizes something of a hierarchy in different conceptions of God. According to him, God is more personified and concrete on lower levels of understanding, higher levels according no conventional attributes to their conception of God (Buddhadasa 1967: 64–66). Although he does not explain how he understands God, this suggests that he regards the Buddhist concept of "God" as superior to that of other traditions.

The idea of the dhamma as the truth in its highest form is also manifested in his view that different religious leaders who appeared at different times in different circumstances all came from the same god, the dhamma. In a

33 Swearer 2000: 191–192.

34 Buddhadasa 1969: 6. He uses "voidness," but this translation has been replaced with "emptiness" for the purpose of clarity.

35 Buddhadasa 1967: 123. This line of thought is also expressed by Dhammananda, as well as Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–), a Vietnamese Zen teacher who associates closely with Christians, particularly Catholics. See Dhammananda 1974 21; Hanh 1995: 197. Also see Kiblinger 2005: 92–101.

36 Buddhadasa 1967, introduction.

37 Buddhadasa 1967: 8. The original Arabic word is *rasūl*, i.e., messenger.

framework not dissimilar to the *trikāya* doctrine, he asserts that the various historical Buddhas such as Gotama Buddha and Jesus Christ appeared as emanations of Adi Buddha (Buddhadasa 1967: 105). This implies that he would also consider the prophet Muhammad as one of the historical Buddhas emanating from Adi Buddha.[38] Despite seeing the same ultimate truth taught in non-Buddhist traditions, Buddhadasa thus ultimately incorporates them into the Buddhist worldview in an inclusivist manner by extending Buddhahood to non-Buddhist religious leaders.[39]

Alexander Berzin: Emphasizing the Importance of God for Muslims

Alexander Berzin (1944–) is a Tibetan Buddhist scholar and teacher. One of the most prominent Buddhist figures in contemporary Buddhist-Muslim relations, he has been active in the Buddhist-Muslim dialogue and particularly willing to adopt ideas conducive to fostering peaceful relations between the two religions.[40] He is perhaps the most important proponent of establishing doctrinal bridges between Buddhism and Islam, and prefers to takes up doctrinal issues, such as Buddhists as People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) in Islam and the Buddha as a prophet (or more specifically as Dhu'l Kifl), in his dialogues with Muslims.[41]

It is also to be noted that Berzin has accompanied and translated for the fourteenth Dalai Lama on a number of occasions. The Tibetan Buddhist leader has been actively engaged in dialogues with many of his "Muslim friends," and has spoken out for them as a "defender of Great Islam," particularly after

38 Strictly speaking, this would contradict the Buddhist teaching that only one historical Buddha appears in each eon. He does not explain how further historical Buddhas can be considered to have appeared while the teaching of Gotama is still known in the world.

39 A view that all non-Buddhist traditions can be embraced under Buddhism is also found in Kantipālo 1964: 36–37. Contemporary views claiming to be pluralist are often inclusivist in their basic thinking. Whether the said proponent is aware of this or not, their views represent inclusivism in so far as the concept of an ultimate truth is conceived and presented in the language specific to the tradition in question. Another salient example of this is the view of Masao Abe mentioned above.

40 He has been engaged in a series of dialogues with Muslims since 1994 in various venues ranging from African locations such as Mauritius and Zanzibar, to Middle Eastern nations like Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan, as well as Indonesia. See Berzin 2006b.

41 For more on major theories concerning possible qur'anic reference to Buddhism, see Obuse 2010: 216–217.

the 9/11 incident.[42] It is possible that Berzin's stance and that of the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism have been mutually formative. However, in his own interreligious activities, the former attempts to go much further than the latter, by dealing directly with the question of God, rather than dismissing it as "not important."[43]

While being clear that "Buddha is not an omnipotent God," Berzin regards the commonly supposed theistic-atheistic divide as a highly sensitive matter. He advocates that it is best to avoid mentioning this divide directly to Muslims when in dialogue, since "that would lead to the instant closing of the door." Instead, he takes up the potential Muslim understanding that God is "nothingness": "Buddhism has certain aspects that you could ascribe to Allah, or in general God, but doesn't put them all together under one term" (Berzin and Akpinar 2003).

While he does not draw a direct parallel between emptiness and the concept of God in Islam, Berzin resorts to the concept of Adi Buddha, put forward by Indonesian Buddhists, as a direct equivalent of God in that it can be understood as "the creator of our appearances, what we perceive" (Berzin and Akpinar 2003). According to him, Adi Buddha is clear, light, primordial consciousness, which creates "all appearances of samsara and nirvana." This, he argues, concurs with the Islamic view that God is "not a person but [is] an abstract creating principle." Thus Berzin can argue, "Buddhism does accept a 'creator God' but with its own unique interpretation" (Berzin 2006b). He further holds, on the basis of this reasoning, that Adi Buddha, being "beyond words, beyond concepts, unimaginable," is something Muslims could easily relate to "because in Islam, Allah is not personified" (Berzin and Akpinar 2003).

Rikyū Kono (1931–): Parallels between Allah and Amida Buddha

Rikyū Kono (1931–), a Jōdo-shin monk and scholar whose expertise covers English literature and comparative cultures, is probably the only contemporary Japanese Buddhist to have attempted a substantial direct comparison

42 Kuruvila 2006. Like Dhammananda and Thich Nhat Hanh mentioned above, the Dalai Lama argues that all religions share the same basic message of love, compassion, and forgiveness, while regarding it as realistic for different people to use different methods [to reach their goals]. He clearly states that the practice of Islam can be recognized by Buddhists as a path of salvation. See Dalai Lama 2010.

43 Instead, he highlights "the law of causality . . . [which] is the same in all religions" (Dalai Lama 2007).

between Buddhism and Islam.[44] Kono became interested in Islam through his exchange with a Muslim landlord when he lived in London in the 1970s. Given the sense of connection he experienced with Muslims, he focuses on comparing the two traditions from the Jōdo-shin perspective.[45] He initially published his observations in academic publications, but later shared his views of Islam with lay followers of the Jōdo-shin school through talks and popular books.[46]

Kono's discussion focuses on doctrinal issues,[47] especially on drawing parallels between Allah and (Amida) Nyorai (Sanskrit: *tathāgata*; i.e., Buddha). He observes that both are submitted to and worshipped by their followers as the one and only savior.[48] They are also said to share characteristics, such as being formless, colorless, and having many names to show their different attributes.[49] Kono adds that the originally formless Amitābha appears to his followers as a "personified God . . . merciful and compassionate" (Kono 1995: 317), as if he were Allah.[50] Kono is generally focused on similarities between Allah and Amida Buddha;[51] however, he does observe that Allah punishes those who do not follow his teachings, contrasting this with the way Amida Buddha grants universal salvation even to people who have done wrong, accepting them as

44 The writings discussed here are Kono 1989, 1995, 1998, 2003, and 2004. While the first three are of an academic nature, the other two are for a more popular readership. They all contain similar arguments concerning Allah and Amida Buddha.

45 Regarding Islam, he does not seem to concentrate on any specific trend, but relies on the works of Toshihiko Izutsu, such as Izutsu 1979. See Kono 1995: 307.

46 His 2003 and 2004 books are good examples. Kono was also invited to give a talk to a Muslim audience on Islam and Jōdo-shin Buddhism in 2008. See Kono 2008.

47 In relation to practices, he regards the Islamic system of *zakāt* particularly favorably, contrasting this with the "rather conceptual" life of Jōdo-shin followers (Kono 1995: 369–371). For his appreciation of the way faith is lived out among Muslims, see Kono 2003: 226, 235. Similar sentiment is expressed in Hiro 1992: 20, 36.

48 Kono 1995: 355. Although everything is "empty," Kono argues that it is permitted to "worship the formless Amida Buddha via statues and paintings . . . [which are] expedient *dharmakāya* (Japanese: *hōben hossin*)."

49 For example, see Kono 1995: 306–308.

50 Like many other Buddhist writers, Kono seems to be unaware of the distinction made in Islam between the impersonal and personified aspects of Allah, regarding him primarily as a personal god.

51 He makes a few brief remarks that could suggest inclusivism, but does not pursue such lines of approach. For example, he observes that the creation (by Allah) can be considered to occur when the time is matured (in terms of dependent origination). See Kono 1995: 315.

they are.[52] At one point, he even expresses his personal belief that "Amida Nyorai embodies Himself in foreign cultures sometimes as Allah and sometimes as Jesus," which makes it unproblematic for him to worship in Christian churches, for example (Kono 2003: ix).

Kono's willingness to emphasize the comparability of Allah and Amida Buddha as a manifestation of emptiness is also reflected clearly in the way he identifies the attitudes of Muslims with those of Jōdo-shin followers.[53] For example, he views the Islamic notion of *abdullāh* (servant of God) to be in line with the idea in the Jōdo-shin tradition of becoming a slave (Japanese: *dorei*) to Nyorai (Kono 1995: 324). Regarding *islām* and *kimyō* as referring to the same attitude,[54] this Jōdo-shin scholar further suggests that (Jōdo-shin) Buddhism be recognized as genuine by Muslims within the context of the qur'anic statement: "the only genuine religion is '*islām*.' "[55]

Finding God in Buddhism: An Innovation or Interpretation?

The views of Buddhadasa, Berzin, and Kono deal directly with the concept of God in Abrahamic traditions by emphasizing the ultimate truth in Buddhism, whether it is the dhamma (Sanskrit: dharma), emptiness, Adi Buddha or Amida Buddha, and comparing it to God to varying degrees. When their views are compared with those found in earlier Buddhist discussions of Islam and those of other contemporary Buddhists, their approaches appear highly innovative.

Buddhadasa, a Theravāda monk, freely resorts to the generally Mahāyāna concepts of *ekayāna*, *trikāya*, and emptiness, using the latter almost interchangeably with the dhamma. His reference to Adi Buddha is also notable, given the prominent position accorded to the historical Buddha in the Theravāda tradition. Advanced in the 1960s, much earlier than Berzin's and Kono's accounts, Buddhadasa's view seems to share the conceptual basis of the "traditional" inclusivist approach formulated in the context of dialogue with

52 Like some other Buddhists in and outside Japan, he attributes this to the dualistic worldview of Islam. See Kono 1995: 341–342, 349, 364; 2003: 62.

53 He also compares the prophet Muhammad and Shinran (1173–1262), the founder of the Jōdo-shin tradition, as receivers of the messages of Allah (i.e., the Revelation) and of Amida Buddha (i.e., *hongan*), respectively. See Kono 1995: 312, 2004: 95–96.

54 Describing "*islām*" as "submitting oneself to Allah," Kono uses the word in a Buddhist context, such as "[to] '*islām*' to the Amida Buddha" (2004: 53). "*Kimyō*" means to take refuge in the Buddha's teachings, submitting oneself to him. This term and "*namu*" both derive from the Sanskrit "*namas*." Iwamoto 1988: 177, 553.

55 Kono 2003: 19 Although the passage is not specified, it is most likely 3: 19.

Christians. However, it is highly possible to regard his early initiative to establish a doctrinal bridge among different religions through the common concept of "God" as highly "progressive" among Buddhist inclusivists. Although he does not specifically discuss Islam nor show a detailed understanding of the notion of God in Islam, his willingness to derive inspiration from the qur'anic teachings also strongly indicates his openness towards Islam.[56] It can therefore be said that, although presented in an inclusivist manner and intended primarily for Christians, Buddhadasa's worldview heralded the emergence of parallelism; it shares, to some extent, the focus on the question of God found in parallelist accounts, as well as the attention to Islamic doctrines.[57] While he is not directly involved with communal issues found in Southeast Asia, Buddhadasa's attention to Islamic teachings may be attributed to his awareness of the significant Muslim presence in his home country (i.e., Thailand) and of the communal problems that have arisen between Buddhists and Muslims there.[58]

Berzin's approach is clearly one of parallelism. The importance of finding a Buddhist equivalent of God finds extremely clear expression in his approach. Unlike Buddhadasa, Berzin discusses Islam specifically, rather than referring to it merely when discussing Christianity. While being careful not to undermine the basic Buddhist worldview, Berzin attempts to provide an interpretation of the concept of ultimate truth in Buddhism in such a way that it can find continuity with the Islamic notion of God. What distinguishes his approach from other contemporary Buddhist references to Islam is the way he presents God from the Islamic perspective, highlighting the peculiarity of the Islamic under-

56 For an evaluation of Buddhadasa's approach by a contemporary Thai monk, see, for example, Sivaraksa 1988: 38.

57 It is illustrative to compare Buddhadasa's case with that of Thich Nhat Hanh, who is also fairly keen to discuss the religious diversity of the world from a doctrinal perspective, regarding god as "an equivalent expression for nirvana" in that it is "the ground of being" (1999: 43). Hanh's willingness to take up doctrinal discussion could be partly because he has been engaged with Christians in France, where he is based, and is less involved with practical interreligious issues in Southeast Asia. At the same time, it may equally be possible that the virtual lack of reference to Islam in his writings reflects the relatively little exposure to Islam he may have experienced in his native Vietnam.

58 Muslims in Thailand, where Buddhism is the state religion, constitute about five percent of the population. The majority of them are concentrated in the four southern provinces and assume strong representation, forming a majority there of about seventy-five percent. The separatist movement among Muslims in the south has recently given rise to serious political tension between Buddhists and Muslims, resulting in a series of violent clashes between some Muslim insurgents and the Thai military. See Kraus 1982–1984: 410. For more on the conflict, see, for example, Srisompob and Panyasak 2006.

standing of God. By recognizing the fundamentally unknown, no-thing nature of God, he has devised a way to relate Buddhism and Islam on the level of the ultimate truth. Considering how indefinable emptiness is considered to be in the Buddhist tradition, Berzin's connection of this ineffability with that of God is highly unusual among contemporary Buddhist scholars. His approach could also appear rather daring, given that in Islam it is not permitted to compare God with anything else. However, as Berzin himself notes, the question of God is so important for most Muslims that it is virtually impossible to establish a comfortable ground for dialogue with them unless one recognizes some form of highest divinity.[59] By considering the Islamic definition of God and Muslim sensitivity concerning the question of God, he has attempted to create a more conducive environment for Buddhist-Muslim dialogue.[60]

While aiming, like Berzin, at promoting mutual understanding and acceptance between Buddhists and Muslims, Kono discusses commonalities between Buddhist and Islamic doctrines in far more detail. He is particularly focused on drawing parallels between Allah and Amida Buddha in being a savior and object of worship. The centrality of Amida Buddha in Kono's analysis clearly reflects his commitment to the Jōdo-shin tradition.[61] Kono's keenness to equate the two is exceptional, especially considering his reservation about Allah's stern aspects as a judge and punisher.[62] This suggests that Kono's approach derives from his own experience with Muslims and his wish to better relate to them. His willingness to enhance Buddhist-Muslim relations and their mutual understanding at a grassroots level is also clear from the fact that

59 This is also the experience of the present author when explaining Buddhism to Muslims. It is vital to acknowledge some monotheistic idea at the outset; once it is known that there is also a "god-like entity" (e.g., Amida Buddha) in Buddhism, Muslims are more willing to engage in discussion.

60 Berzin has recently suggested that the issues of shared ethics and the concept of a holy war (as having two levels) be prioritized over the question of God for the purpose of fostering world peace. See Berzin 2006a: 228. In terms of generating mutual understanding between Muslims and Buddhists, however, the importance of relating to the concept of God, as he states elsewhere, seems to remain essential.

61 This also explains why he compares the prophet Muhammad to Shinran and not to the historical Buddha. Yet, Kono acknowledges the Muslim idea of the historical Buddha being a prophet. See Kono 2003: 117, 2004: 89.

62 Although, as mentioned above, Amida Buddha may be considered comparable to God in Abrahamic traditions in general, attempts to compare Amida and Allah directly have so far been extremely limited. One of the only examples of such comparison, prior to Kono, is the view of Kōtarō Yamaoka (1880–1959), one of the first Japanese converts to Islam. See Shimano 1975.

he, in his capacity as a Jōdo-shin monk, has shared his observations with his fellow Buddhists as well as with a Muslim audience in Japan.

Conclusion: Using Doctrinal Perspectives to Enhance Interreligious Harmony

Despite showing different structures and foci, the three accounts discussed above seem to share an awareness that the atheistic worldview of Buddhism can pose a major problem for Muslims. In response to this, they attempt to tackle what is a potentially debilitating doctrinal conundrum by emphasizing a Buddhist equivalent of God in discussing Islam in order to foster a sense of solidarity between Buddhists and Muslims.

The willingness among the above-mentioned Buddhist scholars to establish a connection with Islam through its doctrines cannot be attributed to their denominational backgrounds since they represent different strands of Buddhism. Rather, given that they all are important Buddhist leaders with extensive international careers, it is probable that they, as major authorities of their respective traditions, are willing to communicate potentially conflict-resolving, peace-building perspectives in order to promote interreligious harmony and world peace.[63]

As such, this new tendency towards the doctrinal discussion of Islam for the purpose of interreligious harmony is still very much a minority approach. It is a very modern phenomenon appearing in direct reaction to contemporary situations in which encounters of different cultures and peoples have drastically increased, and interreligious relations have become large-scale causes of conflict. Kono's case also suggests that personal contact with Muslims can encourage a more doctrinally accommodating attitude towards Islam and Muslims.

It has to be noted that such attempts may be regarded as undermining traditional formulations in Buddhist doctrines, and can receive criticism from within the Buddhist community.[64] However, they are trying to move beyond traditional perceptions of Islam to overcome the psychological gap created by

63 Although Kono's interreligious career is not as extensive as those of Buddhadasa or Berzin, his approach definitely forms part of the new trend. As a representative and leader of his tradition, he has also been keen to communicate his ideas to Buddhists and Muslims across a broader spectrum of society.

64 When the present author discussed their views in an international academic conference on the theme of Buddhism and Islam, for instance, there was some confused resistance from a segment of the Buddhist audience.

the (perceived) doctrinal remoteness between the two traditions.[65] In other words, their willingness to break new ground by attempting to establish doctrinal connections between the two traditions is motivated by an agenda to enhance interreligious harmony and mutual understanding on a global scale.[66]

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65 It is, therefore, pertinent that some of the major efforts made in dialogue and discussions to explore doctrinal compatibilities between Buddhism and Islam were undertaken after the Bamiyan incident.

66 While some may be inclined to dismiss their views simply as eccentric personal interpretations, keenness to establish doctrinal bridges is no longer limited to personal voices like these. Potential doctrinal connections between Buddhism and Islam have also started to be discussed during large-scale interreligious dialogues. See, for example, UNESCO 2003: 3; Tao et al. 2004. Although such moves are not always welcomed by Buddhist participants, this suggests that identification of a Buddhist counterpart of God is becoming, at least for some, a serious necessity to further Buddhist-Muslim dialogue. For Buddhists' resistance towards a Muslim attempt to find something of a god in Buddhism, see Schmidt-Leukel 2010: 351.

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